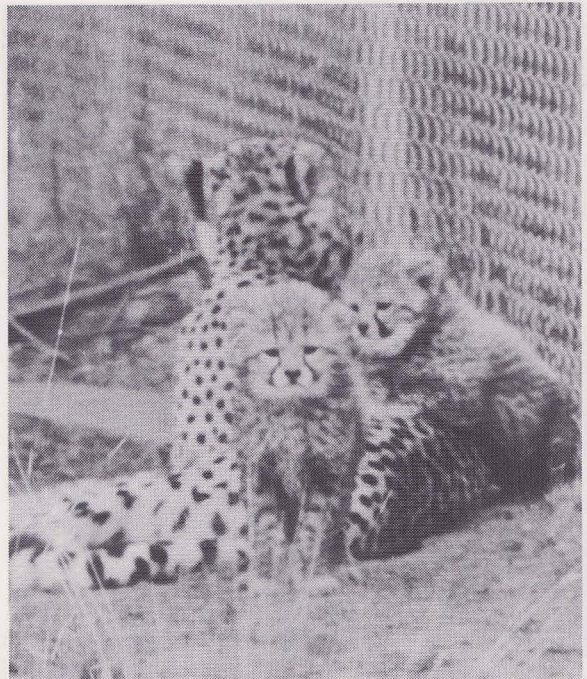


Rare Birth at Western Plains Zoo

by
Penni Brydon

On 11th June, a bird-like twittering was clearly heard over the intercom system installed in the cheetah cubbing den at Western Plains Zoo. Cheetah cub vocalizations are very bird-like, so staff were sure cubs had been born and were healthy.



THE cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) is an endangered species, with less than 5 000 animals believed left in the wild. Although the fastest land mammal, the cheetah has fallen prey to hunters and been captured for the illegal pet trade. Changes to habitat have removed many of the cheetah's natural prey. This has greatly reduced their range.

This restricted range, together with the small population, is believed responsible for low fertility and high infant mortality rates observed in the wild and in captivity.

The birth of the three male cubs brings Western Plains Zoo's total cheetah population to seven (five male, two female). Generally solitary animals in the wild, only one cheetah is usually on public display at the zoo. The other animals are kept off exhibit in the breeding area which has large yards and a wide view of grassy plains with kangaroo, deer and other animals. The ability to see over a large area with prey is said to be beneficial to breeding. This and many other facts have been discovered after several years of research and management.

Acting officer-in-charge, Richard Jakob-Hoff, has taken a prominent role in the global management of this endangered species. He is Species Co-ordinator for all cheetahs kept in Australia and New Zealand. Together



'Tsavo'

with cheetah research co-ordinator Rebecca Larkin, head keeper Bruce Campbell and keeper Peter Christie, he has developed a Cheetah Management Programme which will ensure the greatest possible chance for the species in Australian zoos.

In 1981, head keeper Bruce Campbell visited Whipsnade Zoo in England, the first zoo to successfully breed cheetahs (1968). His findings led to a major restructuring of the cheetah facilities at Western Plains Zoo. The cheetahs were transferred from their exhibit area (now the Cape Hunting Dog exhibit) to the off exhibit breeding area completed in 1983.

In early 1986, Rebecca Larkin, a newly graduated veterinarian, began an intensive study of cheetah behaviour for a Diploma in Wild Animal Management and Husbandry. Her research has been essential to the operation of the breeding programme.

Peter Christie also joined Western Plains Zoo in 1986, as a keeper. The many observations made by Peter in his day to day work with the cheetahs have been invaluable. Peter also had to move temporarily from his home in Wellington to assist in rearing the cubs.

Two previous litters had been recorded at Western Plains Zoo, however, neither survived more than a few days. Zoo staff involved in the breeding programme carefully examined all the facts after these two disappointments and were extremely pleased when the third litter proved healthy.

The cubbing dens at Western Plains Zoo were designed to allow human observation of the litter with the minimum disturbance to the mother.

When the cubs were weighed at four days it was decided, to maximize the likelihood of survival, to remove the smallest cub for hand rearing. A special formula had been developed by an Adelaide biochemist if hand feeding was found to be necessary.

The cubs were named 'Tsavo' (a national park and river in Kenya), 'Mikumi' (a national park in Tanzania) and 'Kibo' (the highest peak on Mt. Kilimanjaro). Tsavo and Mikumi remained with their mother, 'Marah', a seven year-old born in the Cheetah Sanctuary, South Africa. Kibo went home with Rebecca Larkin. The cubs' father, Gus, remained on public exhibit.

Kibo made his first appearance to the media on 1st July, captivating all those present. Photographic sessions were limited, as were the number of people present at any one time. Kibo was a very important cub and his health was not to be risked.

Rebecca and Peter have been kept busy with around the clock care (initially 2-hourly feeds) needed for the tiny cub, who spent his first weeks in a humidicrib with a lambswool slipper and clock for company.

Cheetah cubs do not have distinct spots, but instead have a thick mantle of long smokey-grey fur from head to tail. This gradually falls off until only a scruff of hair remains at the shoulders at about 12 weeks of age.

At seven weeks of age (the time of writing), Kibo and his brothers have been introduced to solid foods. Kibo has baby food, ground Whiskettes and small amounts of meat.

The cubs are extremely active and should be on display by the October school holidays. The health and welfare of the cubs is however first priority, so no definite date can be given for public viewing.

It is also uncertain whether Kibo will be reunited with his family. He will be introduced to them from an adjoining enclosure, with visual contact only initially. Behaviour of all the animals will be closely monitored. Further decisions on compatibility can then be made.

If Kibo has to be reared apart from his family this should not cause any problems with his own development, or later mating ability. Gus, his father, was hand raised four years ago at the De Wildt Breeding Sanctuary, South Africa. He responds to keepers and will often come to the wire of his night yards for a scratch on the head.

Western Plains Zoo is justifiably proud of its new babies. Their management plans will be integrated with those of other zoos overseas in an international co-operative effort to save the cheetah from extinction.

Special thanks to Maree George, Richard Jakob-Hoff, Rebecca Larkin, Bruce Campbell and Peter Christie, who provided the information for this article.

Bruce Campbell took the photos.



'Mikumi'

BATS AND OTHER URBAN WILDLIFE

While the Royal Zoological Society encourages people to "look-up" in its Bat Watch programme, the sponsors of the NSW Urban Wildlife Survey (the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the Gould League of NSW and World Wildlife Fund Australia) are going one step further and encouraging people to look down, in, under, and anywhere else where an animal may be crawling, eating, running or flying.

The project's aim is to provide members of the community with an opportunity to discover and record the variety of wildlife within their local urban area. Wildlife information kits will be given to interested people throughout the survey period (September to March). Included in the wildlife kits are response sheets to enable wildlife observations to be recorded. These sheets will be collected throughout the survey and eventually used in the compilation of a book on the wildlife of urban NSW.

As the NSW Urban Wildlife Survey is to be a state wide project the organizers are hopeful that it will generate considerable interest within the community, leading to an increased awareness of wildlife. All members of the Royal Zoological Society are invited to take part, especially anyone who could assist in the following areas:

- * acting as a "wildlife identifier" (this would involve receiving general enquiries regarding species identification and/or providing general wildlife information),
- * helping to organize and/or lead walks (for example, spotlighting treks in urban bushland areas).

If anyone would like more information on the survey please contact John Pastorelli on (02) 875 4649 or by writing to P.O. Box 150, Beecroft 2119.